



# Volunteers in the Courts:

## *A Partnership for Justice*

*Volunteer programs open wide the doors of the courts to the community. Through volunteer programs, communities and courts can come together in partnership to improve how courts respond to the needs and interests of the people they serve. When members of the community work side by side with judges and court staff, we increase the range and scope of programs the courts are able to offer and we give the community a tangible stake in its court system.*

- Chief Justice Shirley S. Abrahamson, Wisconsin Supreme Court

The Volunteers in the Courts Program was launched in February 1996 with a series of workshops under the direction of Chief Justice Shirley S. Abrahamson and then-Chief Justice Roland B. Day to explore (1) citizen volunteers in court-related work and (2) the practical implications of expanding the role of volunteers in the Wisconsin court system.

Following the workshop, a cross-disciplinary, statewide Volunteers in the Courts Coordinating Committee was formed. The Committee surveyed court staff, social service agencies, law enforcement officials and nonprofit agencies throughout Wisconsin about existing court-related volunteer programs. More than 350 individuals and organizations responded. The survey located over 100 programs, assisted by thousands of volunteers.

In April 1997, the information gathered by the coordinating committee was compiled in the *Volunteers in the Courts: Court-Related Volunteer Programs in Wisconsin*.

The catalog was unveiled at a one-day, statewide conference in April 1997. Nearly 200 attendees including judges, program directors, volunteers and human service providers spent the day in workshops conducted by volunteer program coordinators from all parts of Wisconsin. Workshop participants received basic information about the programs and learned how best to replicate programs in their own counties or courts. Janet L. Jackson, representing the American Bar Association at the conference, said that Wisconsin appears to be "at the forefront" of the court volunteers movement.

In July 1997, Wisconsin District Court Administrator Steve Steadman and Noreen Kurowski of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) gave a presentation on Wisconsin's Volunteers in the Courts Program at the National Association for Court Management Conference in

Washington, D.C. They discussed the Guardianship Monitoring programs operating in three Wisconsin counties and the Volunteer Summer Law Student Internship Program. During the internship program's three years in operation, more than 100 law students

from around the nation have come to Wisconsin as interns to several judges of the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals and circuit courts.

In October 1997, Chief Justice Abrahamson was a keynote speaker at The Wisconsin Promise Volunteerism Summit co-chaired by First Lady Sue Ann Thompson and Milwaukee businessman Martin Stein. Modeled after the President's national summit held in April 1997, the state summit brought together delegates from each county to discuss ways of developing community resources for youth through the use of volunteers. The Wisconsin court system played an active role in planning for the summit. Reserve Judge Nancy E. Wheeler and former Assistant to the Chief Justice Trina E. Gray served as panelists and facilitators at the event and informational material about the Volunteers in the Courts Program was made available to the 700 conference attendees.



The Volunteers in the Courts catalog was hailed by Attorney General Janet Reno as a model for the nation. In May 1997, Reno visited Madison to gather suggestions about the government's role in community volunteer efforts. She met with representatives of the three branches of state government (including Chief Justice Shirley S. Abrahamson, pictured above), talked with volunteers and juvenile offenders in the Dane County Juvenile Detention Center and conferred with CASA volunteers in the Supreme Court conference room.

Due to the growing number of court-related programs using volunteers, the Supreme Court and State Bar produced a second edition of the catalog in June 1998.

The Volunteers in the Courts Initiative was singled out as a national model of court/community collaboration in an April 2000 bulletin of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). "Opening the Courts to the Community: Volunteers in Wisconsin's Courts" outlines the various types of court-related volunteer programs active throughout the state and credits the success of these programs and the recognition the state has received to the work of people at the local level.

"Opening the Courts to the Community" is available online at [www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/bja/178935.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/bja/178935.pdf), or by calling the National Criminal Justice Reference Service at (800) 688-4252 (publication number NCJ178935). There is no charge for the bulletin.

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## Volunteers in the Courts Catalog

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The first Volunteers in the Courts catalog, which was published in cooperation with the State Bar of Wisconsin, was organized by Reserve Judge Nancy E. Wheeler and volunteer Nora Cusack. The catalog, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, is intended not only to provide information about the more than 150 existing programs, but also to promote replication of programs in other parts of the state. Program coordinators, judges and others involved in the justice system are encouraged to use the catalog to enhance communication between counties and programs throughout the state.

A second edition of the Volunteers in the Courts catalog was completed in June 1998. Close to 50 new programs appear in the catalog. Some are pilot programs, some are replicated models of existing programs and some were not discovered in time for the first edition. The catalog was distributed, free of charge, to judges, district court administrators, volunteer program coordinators and public library depositories in Wisconsin. The catalog is available on the court system's Web site at [www.courts.state.wi.us/news/vl\\_progs.pdf](http://www.courts.state.wi.us/news/vl_progs.pdf).

Please report new and expanding programs to the Wisconsin Supreme Court by calling (608) 266-1298 or by e-mail at [karen.leonedenie@courts.state.wi.us](mailto:karen.leonedenie@courts.state.wi.us).

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## Successful Court-Related Volunteer Programs

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Each listing in the catalog of court-related volunteer programs includes a brief program description and information about whom to contact for further information plus summary data on budget and funding sources, number and source of volunteers, and type of court served. Following are brief descriptions of four representative programs.

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## Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)

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CASA programs are designed to assist the courts and help safeguard the welfare of children who have been found in need of protection and services. CASA programs use volunteers to monitor the living conditions of neglected or abused children and ensure that court orders are followed. With closer supervision, these children are able to continue living in their own homes, eliminating the need for foster care in some circumstances.

CASA volunteers are trained advocates for children who are involved in the court system. They are required to make a one-year commitment, working between 10 to 15 hours each month.

Being a CASA volunteer is a big commitment, but Dane County CASA director Marsha Varvil-Weld told a Portage Daily Register reporter there is no shortage of volunteers. "It's amazing," she said, "There is a tremendous number of people out there who are interested and willing to help an abused child."

CASA programs are operating in a number of Wisconsin counties, including Brown, Columbia, Dane, Fond du Lac, Kenosha, La Crosse, Milwaukee and Sauk, and the Red Cliff CASA program is being developed by the Lake Superior Chippewa Indians with a grant from the National CASA.

Dane County Circuit Court Judge Sarah B. O'Brien credits CASA programs for building judges' trust in using volunteers in the courts. They have proven their worth.

"It's a win-win situation. Teen court is good for volunteer jurors and attorneys to see how a court operates, and it works for the defendants and their families . . . because peer juries can see through a bad attitude and defendants are more likely to listen to their peers instead of an adult."

Judge Bruce Schmidt,  
Winnebago County Circuit Court

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## Teen Courts

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Teen court programs come in many forms. Typically, teen courts hear the cases of juveniles between the ages of 12 and 17 who have committed their first non-violent offenses or who are minor repeat offenders. In most programs, offenders must

admit guilt before the court accepts their cases. Teens either sit on a panel to recommend sentencing, as in Trempealeau's court; or a more formal court process follows where attorneys, bailiffs, clerks and jurors are all volunteer teens. Judges in these courts are most often adults—volunteer circuit and municipal court judges, attorneys, law enforcement officers and other members of the community.

In October 1999, a conference on Teen Courts hosted more than 100 representatives from across the state to learn more about this form of alternative sentencing. The Wisconsin Teen Court Association (WTCA) was started as a result of the conference. To find out more about WTCA, contact Nancy Anne Livingston, Vilas County Teen Court, at (606) 244-8215.

Sentences, designed to fit the particular offense, can include one or several of the following: jury duty, community service, an apology letter to the victim, essays, mentoring, or restitution. The goals are restitution to the community and victims and giving youth an opportunity to become accountable for their behavior and develop as responsible citizens.

Winnebago County was the first in Wisconsin to implement a Teen Court. Under the direction of circuit and municipal court judges who volunteer their time, several other counties are running similar programs, including Bayfield, Brown, Iowa, Jefferson, La Crosse, Marathon, Sheboygan, Trempealeau, Vilas, Waukesha, Wood and others.

## Mediation Programs

Several Wisconsin counties have begun training volunteers to serve as mediators in various types of disputes. Volunteers include attorneys, university professors and administrators, teachers, business people, homemakers and others.

Working singly or in pairs, the volunteers mediate family matters, small claims and civil cases. The goal is to bring the parties to settlement before the case goes to trial. Success rates are high and in at least one county the parties in small claims actions are required to try mediation first.

Volunteers also mediate victim/offender conferences, where victim and offender meet to discuss the offense. In Jefferson County, volunteers will stand in for victims who are not willing to participate in mediation. The volunteer serves as a voice for the community in the session with the offender. In La Crosse County, trained volunteers facilitate face-to-face meetings between adult and juvenile offenders and victims as part of the Franciscan Skemp Healthcare Mediation Services.

According to volunteer mediators, victims and offenders often make a connection during the meetings. Victims sometimes offer forgiveness, the meeting “restores, its replants some of the pain so they can move on,” said a Dane County Volunteer Mediator.

These are just a few examples of mediation programs operating in the state.

## Community Service Programs

Community Service Programs allow judges to impose community service in lieu of jail time and/or fines in certain cases involving minor offenses. It is considered a positive means of working with offenders and improving the community at the same time.

In Barron County, the Community Service Sentencing Program coordinates approximately 400 hours of community service by 50 to 60 adult and juvenile offenders each month. Outagamie County’s Juvenile

Diversion Program includes community service as a means to provide troubled youths with opportunities to experience success and learn self-discipline. According to Outagamie County Circuit Court Judge Joseph Troy, “Rather than simply providing lectures about self-esteem, we have attempted to offer them experiences to help develop it.”

Dodge County Circuit Court Judges Andrew P. Bissonnette, Daniel W. Klossner and John R. Storck recently initiated a volunteer program called the Responsibility Adjustment Program (RAP). Each month, one of the judges organizes a group of youth offenders to participate in a court-ordered community service project. Some youth work in lieu of payment of a fine or forfeiture.

In addition, community service programs are operating in Grant, Langlade, Marquette, Racine and Wood Counties, among others.

## Volunteers at Work: Mediation

A couple had contracted with a company to install a sidewalk by their home. While the crew was working, the couple’s son, an engineer, watched. He believed the job was not being done correctly, and began to give the workers instructions, which they ignored. When the couple received the bill for the sidewalk, they decided to withhold \$1,000 from the payment because they believed the work was sub-standard, based upon their son’s recommendation. The company sued.

The parties were given an option: appear before a court commissioner to adjudicate the dispute, or try to resolve it with help from the Brown County Mediation Center.

In the sidewalk case, the parties initially agreed that the contested issue was the \$1,000. But the volunteer mediator saw it differently. Instead of negotiating a monetary settlement, the mediator talked with the parties to determine what was of real importance. The company did not want a reputation for poor workmanship, and the couple did not want to bear the expense of possibly having to install a new sidewalk in a couple of years. But also at issue was that the couple believed the company’s workers had treated their son disrespectfully. During the discussion, the parents learned that the company’s workers had not known that the son was an engineer with experience in this type of work. And together with the mediator, the parties agreed to revise the company’s warranty. The company stipulated that if the sidewalk showed signs of undue wear in a certain time period, the company would return to correct any problems. In return, the couple would pay the bill in full. The son and staff from the company left the mediation session talking and laughing.

This mediation took place at the Brown County Mediation Center, which opened its doors in March 1999.

## To Learn More About the Volunteers in the Courts Initiative

The 2nd Edition of the *Volunteers in the Courts* catalog is available. Over 50 programs have been added, including pilot and expanding programs, as well as some continuing programs that were not reported in the first edition. The cost is \$10. To obtain a copy of the catalog contact the State Bar of Wisconsin at (800) 362-8096. It can also be downloaded from the court system Web site at [www.courts.state.wi.us/media/pdf/vl\\_progs.pdf](http://www.courts.state.wi.us/media/pdf/vl_progs.pdf).

For court-related program highlights and recent newsletters and reports, visit the Wisconsin court system Web site at [www.courts.state.wi.us/misc/reports/vol\\_courts.html](http://www.courts.state.wi.us/misc/reports/vol_courts.html) or the State Bar of Wisconsin's Web site at [www.wisbar.org/sct/volunteer.html](http://www.wisbar.org/sct/volunteer.html).

Background information on the volunteer programs listed in the catalog is available at:

Wisconsin State Law Library  
1 East Main Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
Madison, WI 53703  
(608) 266-1600

To find out about volunteer opportunities in your community, contact Karen Leone de Nie, program assistant to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, at (608) 266-1298, or by e-mail at [karen.leonedenie@courts.state.wi.us](mailto:karen.leonedenie@courts.state.wi.us).

## Volunteers in the Courts Coordinating Committee Members:

Chief Justice Shirley S. Abrahamson, Volunteers in the Courts Chair; Andrew P. Bissonnette, Circuit Judge, Dodge County; Robert Blessington, Community Service/Education Director, Wisconsin State AFL-CIO; Betty Braden, Member Relations and Public Service Director, State Bar of Wisconsin; Nan Brien, Associate Director, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families; James Burgess, Community Consultant, Madison; Don Clasen, Publications Editor, Wisconsin Council of Senior Citizens; Nan Cnare, Senior Vice-President, Community Initiatives, United Way of Dane County; Shaun Curry, Madison Area Technical College; Nora Cusack, Court Volunteer; Stu Driessen, Volunteers in Offender Services, Outagamie County; Dennis J. Flynn, Circuit Judge, Racine County; Susan Goodwin, Director, Office of Crime Victim Services, Department of Justice; David A. Hansher, Circuit Judge, Milwaukee County; LaToria Hickmon-Kern, Special Projects Coordinator, Urban League of Greater Madison; Steven Jones, President, Dane County Courthouse Employees, AFSCME, Local 720; Kathy King, Justice, Programs Coordinator, Marathon County; Phyllis Lovrien, Irwin Hansen Executive in Residence, U. W. School of Business; Katherine C. Lyall, President, University of Wisconsin System; Mark A. Mangerson, Circuit Judge, Oneida County; William McMonigal, Circuit Judge, Green Lake County; Rita Mehsner, Community Referrals Coordinator, Retired and Senior Volunteer Program of Dane County; Stanley A. Miller, Circuit Judge, Milwaukee County; Carolyn Olson, Clerk of Circuit, Iowa County; Gregory A. Peterson, Circuit Judge, Eau Claire County, Chief Judge, 10th Judicial District; Sally Phelps, State Past-President, League of Women Voters; Carol A. Puerling, Clerk of Circuit Court (Ret.), Washington County; Maureen Quinn, Financial Consultant, Merrill Lynch; Michael Rosenblum, Volunteer Coordinator, Jewish Social Services, President, Dane County Administrators of Volunteer Services; Neil Shively, Journalist; David Titus, Director of Human Services, Dodge County; Amanda Todd, Court Information Officer; Mary Triggiano-Hunt, Volunteer Lawyers Project Coordinator, Legal Action of Wisconsin; Joseph M. Troy, Circuit Judge, Outagamie County; Nancy E. Wheeler, Reserve Judge; Dwight York, State Director (Ret.), Wisconsin Technical College System

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WISCONSIN SUPREME COURT  
PO BOX 1688  
MADISON, WI 53701-1688